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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the emergent perspective in composition studies that sees discourse forms as producing material effects and writing classrooms and programs as part of an apparatus for producing subjective forms, which individual students are then induced to inhabit. The paper suggests that the closed circuit of the classroom is overdetermined by the traditions of New Criticism and by the predominance of the writing process movement, which focuses on means rather than ends. The paper points out that this same criticism could be leveled at nearly all student writing: that it is not designed to change the mind of its primary audience, the instructor, but to serve as a means of evaluating the student. The paper proceeds with a close analysis of a student's essay for an in-class mid-term exam to show that a student may be effectively engaged in an argument about student attitudes toward writing but that the student's writing still leads nowhere. The paper concludes that the students are still writing, sometimes self-consciously, to an audience of one. The paper suggests an apparent solution to the audience problem: audiences may be sought for student work outside the classroom, for instance, on the internet. Appendixes contain quotes from one student and the mid-term exam which was analyzed. (TB)

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Jeffrey Maxson

THE CLOSED WORLD OF THE WRITING CLASSROOM: STUDENT SUBJECTIVITIES AS CREATED BY, AND BREAKING OUT OF, BOUNDS

ED 403 557

I want to start from an emergent perspective in composition studies, which sees discourse forms as producing material effects, and writing classrooms and programs as parts of an apparatus for producing subjective forms, which individual students are then induced to inhabit. For example, Susan Miller in *Textual Carnivals* holds that courses of writing promote a "sensibility" which values "writing processes for their own sake," (96) and students "for activity, reflection, and 'meanings' that are entirely contained in the community constituted by the classroom" (97). This closed circuit of the classroom is overdetermined by the traditions of New Criticism within English departments and by the predominance of the writing process movement, which focuses on means rather than ends. And to this I would add, despite our nods to students' classmates as constituting the audience for student writing, the persistent failure to admit that writing instructors are the primary, if not sole, readers of student writing. In this presentation, using examples from papers written in a basic writing class, I demonstrate how students' subjectivity--which exists apart from their lived experience of history, politics and culture--is created. But I also hold out hope for students to work towards positions which are outside of those created for them by writing teachers, institutional expectations and composition scholarship.

So, again, Miller ties the closed world of the composition class to Eagleton's claim about (capital "L") Literature, namely that it produces a subjectivity which is "sensitive, imaginative, responsive, sympathetic, creative, perceptive, reflective" but, and this he italicizes, "*about nothing in particular*." (98). And Miller, having reviewed course descriptions for composition offerings around the U.S., concludes, "These descriptions reveal the completely self-referential quality of a displaced literary subjectivity" (*Textual* 97). In the interest of time, I'm just going to leave these other excerpts of Miller's argument evocatively on the overhead, and go on with mine.

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J. Maxson

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

I intend today to talk about these ideas with respect to one assignment and one essay in particular it inspired. These examples come from a term-long ethnography of a basic writing classroom at a large research university. And while you may not recognize the example I'll give as the writing of a basic writer, because it is quite competent, it's still the case that the students were in this classroom because they had failed a reading and composition test, that they received only partial credit for the course, and, as I argue in the larger study (Maxson, 1996), that there was a persistent and pervasive orientation towards them, by administrators and faculty and running through the administrative apparatus of the course, as remedial writers.

The subject matter of the course, which was manifested in the more than 20 sections, focused on "the nature and functions of language." In this particular section, the assignments addressed either current events and issues–hate speech on college campuses, the dangers of censorship as shown in Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*–or the purposes and nature of written language–for example, the elements of an effective writing course or a professional writer's definition of writing as exploring the mind and the world. I'm going to focus today on the second type, but I'd like first to say that in response to assignments of the first category, students' essays do in fact address issues currently under public debate, succinctly presenting the various positions on these issues. Still, the essays they produce resemble academic exercises rather than public contributions to these debates.

Of course this same criticism could be leveled at nearly all student writing: that it is not designed to change the mind of its primary audience, the instructor, but to serve as a means of evaluating the student. Certainly the instructor takes into account its cogency as one criterion of evaluation, but I would venture that it is very seldom that student writing serves to instruct or advise its primary reader, and if it did, one might begin to believe that that reader was not qualified to judge such a piece of writing if she had not already taken account of the arguments students could muster, in forming her opinion in advance. Still, the fact that this sort of artificial discursive practice occurs outside of basic writing classrooms does not mean that it is not particularly counterproductive for

students inside such classes. It is there that the disparity between students' and schools' languages is most stark, and there that writing and discussion of language issues could most productively be turned to students' own linguistic orientations. But such dialogues are constrained by the institutional legacies of classroom practice.

That is, the other category of writing topic in the class under study, addressing the purposes for which students write, even more ironically deprives students from seeing the effects their writing can produce. In writing about the differences between students' and professional writers' goals for writing, students are enabled, even encouraged to critique the closed-circuit of the classroom, yet they do so within the same closed circuit which they protest against, and their writing falls on deaf ears. This topic was given as an 80-minute in-class mid-term examination and students were told to follow the structure of a dialogue which they had already practiced in an earlier essay:

> Speaker A: Makes an assertion that is open to debate and includes at least one "because" clause. (thesis)
> Speaker B: Asks a question that points out a weakness or ambiguity in Speaker A's assertion, such as a vague term, a logical fallacy, a hidden assumption.
> Speaker A: Responds to the question asked and may elaborate with an example or a piece of supporting evidence such as a statement of fact or authority.
> Speaker B: argument against evidence or interpretation of evidence or advances second question about initial assertion.
> Continue until dialogue concludes with an assertion that both speaker A and speaker B agree is true and reasonable.

They were also required to include a rhetorical question in the introduction which the thesis answers, and to clear that thesis with the instructor within 20 minutes of the start of the exam. Here's the topic:

> Alicia: Then why read books? Write all these papers?
> Michael: It's simple–to get good grades–to pass the course–to get a degree. That's all–it has nothing to do with real ideas or feelings.
>
> Now it surged up again and I hungered for books, new ways of looking and seeing. It was not a matter of believing or disbelieving what I read, but of feeling something new, of being affected by something that made the look of the world different.
>
> Richard Wright, Black Boy

I write to find out what I believe, what seems logical and sensible to me, what notions I can live with, to make up my mind. Joan Didion

What do you want me to write in this essay? college student

Topic: Professional writers see writing as an act of thinking and self-discovery. Students, while giving lip service to this idea, seem to care about grades and such rewards more. What is your reaction to the polarity expressed in the passages above?

And this is a challenge students take up with pleasure. They argue that this is an unfair comparison, that students have very different needs, orientations and constraints from those of professional writers, and that for professional writers, work is not all exploration and self discovery, either. Yet once again, these student responses are limited in their effect because they do not find a readership outside of the student-teacher dyad. If they protest that this dichotomy is not productive, or not fair to students' needs and interests, then it is the same as laborers complaining individually, without collective representation, to management about unfair working conditions. Their comments cannot be a means of changing the conditions through which their writing is maintained as an exercise in pleasing the teacher, in second-guessing her in order to receive a good grade, because the essays themselves are a part of this system of writing for evaluation by the instructor. And students are being evaluated not so much on their ideas, but on the way in which they put these ideas together. Under this system, the instructor may in fact be quite pleased, and reward students for taking a contrary point of view to that set out in the assignment prompt. According to the lore of the writing teacher, this shows that they're thinking– that they have taken the time and effort to construct an argument that contradicts, rather than seeks (easier) agreement with the premise stated in the topic. Thus students' protests are effectively coopted; the more convincing their arguments on the lack of communicative effect of student writing, the more they are rewarded, and the more they are seen as making progress through the course. Conversely, the student who cannot so fluently construct such a contradictory argument justifies her place in a remedial class, and the instructor's efforts and the system of remedial placement and administration are warranted.

The tension between individual expression and fulfilling an assignment is most succinctly addressed in an essay written by Lana in response to the above topic. Of all the students' essays, hers is the one that most obviously adheres to the directive to use the dialogue format in developing her argument. In fact in Lana's essay, the two voices of the dialogue are marked typographically with different fonts. Alternating between the Macintosh typefaces Geneva and Chicago, Lana's essay delineates the conflict between, respectively, the writer's id and superego, between the student and teacherly perspectives, between writing as exploration and self-expression, and as fulfillment of school assignments and expectations (see Appendix B).

Interestingly enough, though, while only a little more than one third of the essay comprises the Chicago voice,[1] that font appears in 14-point size, while the Geneva font appears in 12-point. Thus the teacherly voice is given space and authority, while the student's voice is left to explain itself and convince the teacherly voice, or the reader, more densely and at more length. And the Chicago voice is more abrupt and reproving, e.g. "The real problem is that your ideas are not clear to yourself" (2), "It is impossible to always be second-guessing what a student is trying to say" (3), while the Geneva voice is more deferent: "I would really like to believe this is true..." (2), "This is my own fault, I suppose" (3).

Further, the outcome of this colloquy, the "assertion that both Speaker A and Speaker B agree is true and reasonable," as the dialogue format has it, comes in the form of a concession on the part of Geneva. That is, the apogee of Geneva's disagreement with Chicago occurs here: "It goes to show you that the professor is not always a good judge of writing" (2). And Geneva does raise other strong objections: that teachers grade one down when they do not agree with one's position rather than focusing solely on form; that while presumably giving lip service to the exploratory

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[1] And it comprises little more than one quarter of the essay if one exludes the introduction, as one probably should, given the discussion below.

power of writing, they are always asking one to explain oneself; and that it's better to just give them what one knows they want, rather than write what is personally meaningful and risk receiving a low grade.

In addition, the first move towards compromise does seem to come from the teacherly side: "There obviously needs to be a medium between the two" (3). Yet, this is followed by what I have noted as some of Chicago's most disparaging words. Ultimately the capitulation is left mostly to the student's voice in the last paragraph of the essay. The statement that "a teacher has never actually written on my paper that my ideas are bad" (3) mitigates what the student voice says earlier about "getting a B- on a paper because the teacher didn't agree with me" (2). And Geneva goes so far as to put herself in the teacher's shoes: "I have to say that if I were grading Shakespeare, I would have probably failed him" (3). This statement considerably softens Geneva's protest that John Steinbeck received poor grades on his high-school compositions (2). Further, it acknowledges Geneva's shortcomings in being unable to appreciate the most highly revered texts of English literature.

So it is relevant to ask whether Lana is doing in this paper what Geneva says is inevitable, that is, giving what "the professor wants to hear" (2). True, by half-way down the third page, it is certainly time to finish this essay, written as it is under the 80-minute time constraint. After all, agreement and closure that are artificial may be better than none at all. Yet there is a sense in which the form of Lana's argument represents a triumph over any conciliation in its content.

This is first of all because the Geneva and Chicago voices, as I have characterized them above, are not the only voices of Lana's essay. That is, the introduction, in 14-point font, begins by setting out the writing-as-free-exploration argument, certainly more the province of Geneva. This is then contradicted by, as the assignment sheet dictates, a "rhetorical question": Why is writing instead a "painful chore" for students? Next, again following the assignment sheet, is a "thesis statement

early responding to this question," namely, "It is probable that grammatical and analytical aspects of writing have been given far too much emphasize in school, resulting in the extinction of a students willingness to put forth their ideas and thoughts honestly" (1). This assertion however is never directly developed, or at least its intriguing focus on "grammatical and analytic aspects of writing" never is, but is left to float suggestively over the ensuing dialogue. It "floats" because its bold typeface sets it off from the surrounding text, because its purport is not developed or even touched on again, and because it is at a level of abstraction that the essay does not return to. That is, the thesis addresses schools in general, their curricular focus, and students' response to this, whereas the rest of the essay refers to the writers' personal experience. Certainly the assignment prompt, "What is your reaction to the polarity expressed in the passages above?" does not preclude such a response. Yet there is no reason to believe that Lana is unfamiliar with the academic preference for impersonal, abstracted analysis, generalized to large populations, as opposed to the personal or anecdotal. Indeed the other responses to this assignment reflect this preference, referring, for instance, to student writers in the third person rather than the first and second.

I would argue, however, that this personal focus succeeds at including what Geneva, and indeed Lana "would really like to say" (2) in addition to the "so-called 'correct' part" (2). In fact, Lana's choice to take (almost perversely) literally the assignment to follow the dialogue format, unlike any of the other students, results in an essay which covers all of the conceptual bases, but in the informal tone of two people speaking to one another. And while the content of Lana's essay may propose a pessimistic resolution of this conflict–in which the teacher is always right–the form of her text provides a utopian version of academic writing. This is a mode in which personal concerns, illustrated by single anecdotes or hypothetical instances evoke broad conclusions.

Of course one could read the disjuncture between the first paragraph and the rest of the paper as a lapse, as a failure to follow through on the thesis, which, after all, had to be approved by the instructor by 20 minutes into the exam period. One might also note an unevenness in tone between

the pronouncements of the first paragraph and the more casual informality of the remainder of the essay. And there are infelicities of grammar, mechanics and coherence within this paragraph, which you have probably noticed. So it would be possible to believe that Lana starts out with a very formal introduction, sees that it has problems, that she has used too much time or that she does not have the evidence to back up her thesis–at least evidence that is scientifically sound–and so reverts to personal experience.

Yet such a reading denies the very tangible achievements of the essay. I do not argue that Lana's essay is unusually innovative or that it challenges the conventions for claim and support in academic writing. But it does respond to the assignment thoroughly and effectively, while at the same time presenting the conflicting points of view sympathetically, offering insights into the circumstances and contingencies which motivate each of them. Instead of posing as an omniscient master-narrator, filtering the teacherly and student's points through a single perspective, Lana lets them speak for themselves. And while Chicago "wins" the argument, Geneva's position is more completely elaborated, and more effectively wins this reader's empathy.

Still, this victory is limited at best. As with the examples above, Lana's ideas never escape the closed world of the classroom, or even the teacher-student dyad (except of course as I have publicized them here). While what her essay accomplishes may be personally valuable, there is no formal mechanism for her to share her insights with other students, no chance to move from reflection to the sort of action that might change the circumstances which induce students to write compositions that are not meaningful to them. And the same can be said for the course's subject matter as a whole. That is, the study of the nature and functions of language may provide students insights, however abstract, into the way language works, which may then make them more proficient, or more thoughtful or more ethical users of language. However, the circumstances and conditions which deliver students into basic writing classrooms, their unequal opportunity to appropriate the language of the academy and the discursive construction of difference as deficiency

are effectively rendered off-limits, just as is the discussion of why students are offered so few opportunities to write what is personally meaningful to them.

In other words, the subject position available to students precludes their writing what is meaningful to them. This subject position further isolates students from one another: It is their individual rather than collaborative work, except in a few carefully controlled instances, that counts. Thus the collective discussion of, for instance the experiences Geneva relates occurs, if it occurs at all, outside of class or outside of the formal class discussion, among small groups of students. It is not acknowledged by the class at large before the instructor, thus limiting even the prospect for change of practice in a single classroom. Finally these subject positions render student work as unconnected to discussions going on beyond the classroom. Students are constituted as producers of formal exercises rather than of writing that has consequences, that leads to change either within or outside the classroom.

And these discursive practices likewise constitute writing instructors as not just capable of focusing, but duty bound to focus, only on particular aspects of student papers and ignore others. They must distinguish between the form of student texts and their content–or more exactly their grammar and mechanics plus the soundness, originality and persuasiveness of their ideas versus their political orientation. That is, a teacher must read to evaluate, not to be persuaded, even though an essay may be evaluated for its persuasiveness of some hypothetical other reader. This creates the circumstance, infrequent but still problematic, of essays which are blatantly racist, sexist, or homophobic in content and which the teacher is supposed to evaluate according to their formal qualities while ignoring their substance (Lankford). Thus the writing instructor, as well as the student, are constituted, as it were, from the neck up: the student as an efficient and careful scribe of thought–of ideas which have no necessary orientation or consequence–and the teacher likewise as an efficient, and fair evaluator of the "effectiveness" of pieces of writing, while ignoring–in some cases suppressing a reaction to–their effect. Of course one would not want

instructors to be evaluating students, as Geneva says she has been evaluated, according to whether or not students' opinions agreed with their own (2). But again, this arises out of the constitution of the classroom as a closed sphere, and the teacher as the sole evaluator of student writing; it is a matter of how discursive practices constitute writing pedagogy rather than one of whether a teacher should evaluate writing in one way instead of another.

Some solutions to the problems I've outlined above are apparent. We can seek audiences for student work outside the classroom–in letters to the editor, journals of student writing, on the Internet, etc. And we can link our writing classes to courses in other disciplines in our institutions, ensuring that the subject matter has more connection to students' college careers. But more essential, and here I'm cribbing from a presentation Richard Miller gave yesterday, is to foreground the regulative processes of the classroom whereby knowledge gets produced. He talked about subjecting the culture of the classroom to critique in the classroom, and not just the apparatus which regulates the power of the teacher over the students, but that which regulates student culture as well, for example prohibiting students from saying "I love to learn." Miller said that these systems of constraint need to be exploded in the classroom before other topics of cultural studies can be addressed. And we would have to include the opposition between "what I really want to say" "and "what the teacher expects of me" as a student-produced subjectivity that needs to be exploded as well. Still, making these subjectivities an object of analysis in itself is not enough; we need to make our classrooms open to the possibility that students may change not just our ideas about teaching or about the subject matter taught, but our practice as teachers both within the classroom and at the level of institutional procedure and belief.

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Appendix A

Quotes from Susan Miller

These descriptions reveal the completely self-referential quality of a displaced literary subjectivity. In imitation of Eagleton, it is fair to infer that the composition course values the student for activity, reflection, and "meanings" that are entirely contained in the community constituted by the classroom. (*Textual* 97)

American higher education... made a private communication between teacher and student the space that student discourse inhabits...[or more precisely,] "communication" as dualistically private and public. They must, in most academic settings, write what only a teacher reads, but they have often been assigned a task of imitating traditional public, persuasive forms of writing. Consequently, they may well have developed..."audience/reader conflict" because they are asked to shout in the study, to whisper in the Coliseum. (*Rescuing* 159-60)

Even in the work of those who investigate writing as a social process–scholars like Patricia Bizzell and David Bartholomae, who appear to embrace deconstructive theories–the instrumentality of the writing course is tied to results in its classroom situation, which is imagined to imitate a broader, but nonetheless depoliticized, social and material context where analyses of power are disconnected from writing. (*Textual* 111)

The process model excludes writing that may still be quickly conceived and executed–that is, written under enormously important time constraints–or that will expose an individual writer to judgments that no one else will suffer or benefit from and that he or she may never know about. These situations are the full content of what I would take to be "processes" of the subject of writing, if not of its academic tradition in composition. (*Textual* 114-15)

[Composition] has not taken responsibility for showing students the variability of writing processes, nor has it shown how their variety connects to particular contingencies in larger cultural systems that privilege some writers over others. (*Textual* 118-19)

Appendix B

Lana's Mid-term

Writing is the utmost way of expressing yourself. When you write, no one can tell you that what you think and feel is wrong. They may be able to agree or disagree with you, but can not ridicule you. Writing is also an important outlet. You are able to explore the deepest and darkest crevices of your mind, and put onto paper whatever you may find there. Exploration of these ideas gives a fresh perspective on issues that may previously not have been held. It takes away from the monotony of everyday life and adds excitement to the world with a combination of fantasy, truth, happiness, and despair. The effects of writing are far reaching, but still there are those who still believe that writing has it's effects only upon the reader. Why is such a wonderful freedom denied the credit that it is due? Why has writing become a painful chore to so many students "forced" to do it? It is probable that grammatical and analytical aspects of writing have been given far too much emphasize in school, resulting in the extinction of a students willingness to put forth their ideas and thoughts honestly.

When writing a paper for one of my classes, I often forget that writing is supposed to be exciting and interesting. I find myself detached from the paper at hand. It is so much more exciting and interesting to

think about other things rather than look at a screen full of words that I really don't mean. There are two parts to every paper written. The part that the professor wants to hear and the part that I would really like to say. Of course, the only part that ever is read is the so-called "correct" part. If that is what gets me a good grade, then that is what I am going to write about. It is so much easier to just be a follower than a leader. The leaders are the ones who end up doing badly on a paper. Besides, it doesn't take long for leaders to be tamed and broken anyway.

The real problem is that your ideas are not clear to yourself. The professor is a scapegoat for you when you do badly on a paper. The solution, is to examine your own ideas more thoroughly, then you will be capable of presenting them effectively. A professor is your guide, not your enemy. They are able to read a paper without bias, and grade it accordingly. They can respect your ideas as long as you are able to support them.

I would really like to believe that this is true, but i know that sometimes it isn't. There have been plenty of times where I have turned in a paper, and gotten it back with comments only on my ideas, not on my grammar or form. It is frustrating, because I end up getting a B- on a paper, because the teacher didn't agree with me. I remember reading that John Steinbeck would always do badly in high-school on all of the papers that he turned in. It goes to show you that the professor isn't always a good judge of writing. I keep a diary of the things that I think about. To me, this is my best writing, because I can let myself go in it. I know that it isn't going to be graded. I use to love writing for school, until I realized that I was limited in the things that I was allowed to say. I wasn't

capable of writing powerful things, because teachers were always telling you to keep it simple. They didn't want to have to think about things, they wanted it spelled out for them. How can you explore, when you're too busy always trying to explain?

There obviously needs to be a medium between the two. It is impossible to always be second-guessing what a student is trying to say. If you are unable to explain your ideas, then maybe you're not really clear about them yourself. Attempting to explain them to somebody else will help you to sort through them.

It is possible for me to examine my writing more before turning it in. A teacher has never actually written on my paper that my ideas are bad; they may just not clearly understand them. This is my own fault, I suppose. I have to say that if I were grading Shakespeare, I would have probably failed him. It is hard to appreciate something that you don't understand or particularly follow in style. It's true, that writing is a tremendous freedom that needs to be applied in the appropriate way in order to be effective. But, it needs to be practiced and refined also. It doesn't come naturally, nor easily. As Donald Hall said, "Writing well is the art of clear thinking and honest feeling." The two things go hand in hand. The best thing to do is learn not to take criticisms personally, rather explore how to present ideas better instead of changing them. In this way, you can learn to write honestly and effectively.